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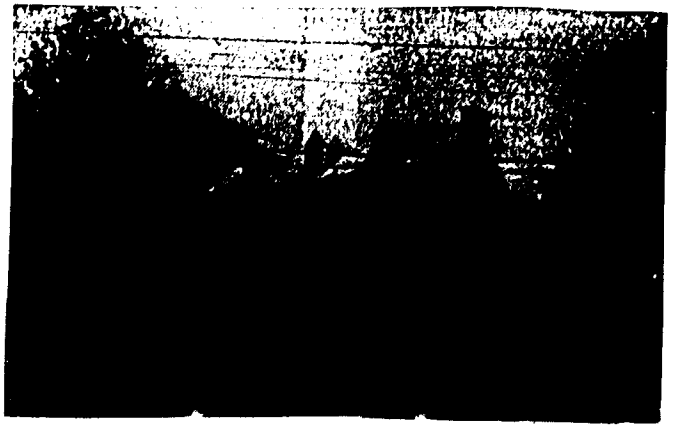
THE GHOST OF GENERAL JENKINS



By Frederic A. Macdonald

Eleven miles north of Huntington there stands in the fields between the Ohio River and State Route 2 the old mansion built by Captain William Jenkins in 1835. It was occupied by his son, General Albert Gallatin Jenkins, before the Civil War. The house was called "Homestead" and its surrounding plantation was called "The Green Bottom," the name given to the tract of wilderness land when it was originally granted to one of Washington's staff, Lieutenant Joshua Fry.

After General Jenkins' death the plantation was broken up among the General's heirs and Homestead became the property of his daughter, Miss Margaret Jenkins. Miss Margaret was thoroughly educated and highly intelligent, becoming an internationally recognized expert and lecturer on Egyptian antiquities and art. She lived abroad most of the time and did not reside at Homestead until her old age. So the mansion had remained vacant for long periods. With my brother, mother and father I lived in the house (although I have no recollection of that period) in the years 1909-1910.

It was during one of Miss Jenkins' long absences that my grandfather, who had acquired most of the land around the mansion, asked my father to oversee his farm as a kind of resident manager. This was in early October of 1908. My father made arrangements with Miss Jenkins to rent Homestead as a residence for his family, there being no dwelling on my grandfather's land other than an old "chickenhouse" which had been converted into a shanty.

The years of neglect, however, had taken their toll so that the mansion required substantial renovation and repair. This could be accomplished only by importing a carpenter and a painter from Huntington. They would be forced to live in the house until the work was done. Because of the infrequency of railroad service, commuting to Huntington was out of the question. My father's plan was to quarter the workmen in Homestead and to live himself in the shanty. But he had some doubt that he could persuade anyone to spend the night in the old mansion because of the commonly known and widely believed story of the ghost of General Jenkins.

Albert Gallatin Jenkins had an education that was unusual even for a Virginia country gentleman — Marshall Academy in Huntington, Jefferson College at Canonsburg, Pa., and Harvard College of Law.

While at Harvard he acquired some skill at the game of ten-pin bowling. When he returned to Green Bottom plantation to assume the traditional role of Virginia planter, lawyer and squire, he saw to it that a bowling alley was installed in the capacious ballroom that occupied the attic of Homestead. There he frequently entertained his neighbors and visitors at a high stakes game of ten-pins on the only bowling alley that existed in the Ohio Valley between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati.

When the Civil War came Jenkins did his duty as a Virginia gentleman. He organized a cavalry force officially recognized as Company E of the 8th Virginia Cavalry but commonly called the "Border Rangers," an apt description of their character as guerrillas to range along Virginia's most distant border. The adventures of General Jenkins up to his death were often amusing, sometimes tragic, and always interesting. But not being pertinent to the story of his ghost they will be omitted. These adventures are recounted more fully in an informal speech I made before the Cabell-Wayne Historical Society at Homestead on September 8, 1968.

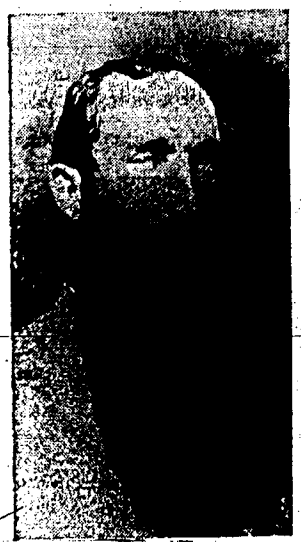
The story of the ghost had its genesis in the sharp skirmish between the Border Rangers and a Union force under General Cox at the mouth of Scary Creek on the Kanawha River near St. Albans. It was said that the battle occurred in early October, 1862, and that both sides suffered so severely that the combat ended in a draw. When the fighting ceased Jenkins reorganized his Rangers farther down the Kanawha to check any Union advance, while he alone (it was said) hurried to Green Bottom plantation to protect his family against the probability of marauders. In the Civil War it was common after a battle for detached and unidentified bands of robbers to loot and pillage the unprotected countryside.

The story continued that when the exhausted General arrived at Homestead he immediately directed his family and slaves to flee down the river to Guyandotte, while hre remained to hide the valuable silver plate, family jewels, and a large sum in specie. A small slave boy remained with him to watch for intruders, while Jenkins, unobserved by anyone, found a hiding place for his treasure. He had just completed his task whe the boy called out:

"Master! Master! Somebody's comin', men on horseback!" The General rushed to the front door just as the unknown horsemen rode into the yard. A shot interrupted Jenkins before he could speak. He fell in the doorway where he bled to death. When I was last in the house, I noted a large round stain in the porous wooden floor at the door, a stain often identified as the General's blood. The slave boy escaped to reach Guyandotte with tragic news.

After the war, the family returned to search for the hidden treasure, but the General had succeeded so well it was never found. But many a farmer who lived in the vicinity, and many of the various families who later lived in the old mansion, swore that in every October near the anniversary of Jenkins' death his ghost would return to Homestead to bowl a tireless and solitary game of ten-pins in the old bowling alley in the attic.

Some went on to say that the General's restless spirit was anxious for a partner. If anyone had the courage to bowl a game with



him and beat him, the ghost would reveal the location of the treasure. Needless to say, no one had the hardihood thus to try his bowling skill.

This was the tale that bothered my father. He did not believe any part of it, but he knew that there were many who were not as skeptical. At any rate, father had high regard for two friends, a carpenter and a painter, who were reliable and altogether brave. Accordingly, father approached them about the work and said:

"Now, fellows, you will have to spend the night in the house, and I don't want you to take the job if you will be afraid. I know you have heard that tale about General Jenkins'

"Yes, sir, we've heard it. There ain't no hant mean enough to scare us. If we catch that old General we'll take this here razor and slice him up like hog-back bacon and have him for breakfast!"

Thus reassured, the two men were hired and with my father took the train to Homestead on a bright October morning. Father established himself in the shanty on the side of the hill overlooking the mansion and the surrounding fields. The workmen busied themselves in setting up cots in the living room of the house and preparing for their work on the morrow. As the evening approached Father sat on the stoop of the shanty enjoying the view of the valley. He could see the light of the workmen's lantern shining through the living room windows and watched their shadows as they moved back and forth preparing for bed.

It was a fine autumn evening, with a soft grey mist drifting from the river. It was at that rare moment between dusk and darkness, when all nature is serene. To my father, it seemed that there was a sense of expectation, almost a tension, in the hush that came so suddenly between the ceasing of the sounds of the day and the beginning of the sounds of the night. He looked again at the old mansion. He could see the light dim extinguished as the men turned out the lantern. There was a moment of stillness.

Suddenly the door flew open with a shattering bang. In the last light of the dusk father could see the two workmen scrambling out of the house in their long underwear. They had their clothes in their hands and were running as fast as they could down the railroad track, scattering cinders and gravel behind them. As they passed my astounded parent they yelled:

"Mr. Macdonald, Mr. Macdonald, that place IS haunted! We's leavin'! Goodbye!"

Father's shouts had no effect. The two men, complete with razors, disappeared down the track at full speed to Huntington.

Father reflected that he should have realized that however brave and reliable his friends might be it was inevitable that they would be affected by a ghost story and the isolation and loneliness in the old house. He determined, therefore, to employ men of a different character — two other men of less skill and reliability who were known to be "rough and tough."

The same explanation of the job was given to the new men and the same reference was made to the "ghost story," except that father prudently omitted to tell them of the flight of his friends on the previous night. The new men responded to General Jenkins' ghost with boots of derision. One of them said:

"The only thing I am afraid of is a drunk with a gun. I ain't never seen a spook, and I don't expect to see one, but if'n I do I'll put him in a box to sell to Barnum and Bailey's circus."

And so that evening was much the same as the previous one.

Father sat in the doorway of the shanty, enjoying the gathering mist and the eerie quiet of the coming night. He could see the lighted lantern in the living room of the old house, and he watched the shadows of the men as they moved about arranging their bedding. The night came on swiftly and silently, again with a mysterious atmosphere of tense expectation. The light dimmed and went out as the lantern was extinguished. All life seemed to be suspended.

To my father's astonishment, the front door of Homestead almost burst from its hinges as both men tried simultaneously to escape. In the dim light their scurrying figures seemed hardly to touch the ground, and as they raced down the railroad tracks barefooted and half dressed they took no notice of my father. They simply fled in silent panic.

Father didn't sleep much that night. The old mansion remained quiet and serene, without sign of life. In the morning, a thorough inspection disclosed nothing unusual, nothing that would account for the obvious terror of two different pairs of workmen. But the mystery had to be solved, or else no one could ever live at Homestead again. Thus it was that Father decided that he himself would spend the next night in the house for a direct and final confrontation with whoever or whatever was so frightening.

When the evening finally came Father was too preoccupied to note the mist from the river and the tense hush. He brought with him to the living room a cot, a lantern, a loaded double-barrelled 12 gauge shotgun, and his dog, Shep. Shep was foolhardy in his bravery; keen and alert in the fields and woods; and devoted and obedient to my father. In addition, Shep had no knowledge of General Jenkins. Father felt safer with Shep than with his gun.

By the time he had made his arrangements it was almost dark. He laid the shotgun on the floor within easy reach at the right of the cot and commanded Shep to lie down on the left. Then he slowly turned down the flame in the lantern. As he did so Shep suddenly raised his head, then jumped to his feet with his tail out straight and his head cocked to listen. Then a moment after the flame was extinguished completely the sound of bowling began.

Father could hear the rumble of the ball as it rolled down the alley, followed by the clatter of the ten-pins as they fell. Then another, and another. Rumble and clatter, rumble and clatter. Shep was frantic with excitement and fury. He raced around the room, growling and barking. Father lit the lantern and the bowling ceased. Shep still didn't like it, but paced the room with those muttered snarls that seem to be canine curs-

General Albert Gallatin Jenkins, one of the area's well-known historical figures, provides the background for Mr. Macdonald's legend. This story was the first place winner in the 'Local Legends Contest' sponsored by the Cabell County Committee of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in cooperation with the Huntington Centennial Commission. The author is an attorney for Island Creek Coal Company in Huntington. His father, the late Frederick A. Macdonald, founded and edited the Herald-Dispatch.

Father said: "Come on, Shep, we're going upstairs to the bedroom where we can hear better, and you be quiet and quit that racket."

So Father picked up his lighted lantern, his shotgun and his cot and started up the stairs with Shep, now subdued, in the lead. The silence was absolute. Father placed the cot in the bedroom, laid the shotgun on his right, bade Shep to lie down on his left, and slowly turned down the lantern flame. As before, Shep suddenly bounded to his feet, his tail and body stiff with attention and consternation, his eyes glued in rapt listening, and his lips curled back in a savage grimace. The

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flame went out. The darkness was total. And then the bowling began again in the attic directly over Father's head. Rumble, rumble; rattle, rattle; again and again in rapid succession the spectral bowler played his frenzied game. Shep was beside himself with fury, racing around the room, baying as savagely as a hound at a treed coon.

Father lit the lantern. The bowling stopped. The only sound was Shep's menacing growls. Father wearily rose from the cot.

"All right, Shep. Shut up and come with me. I guess we must sleep in the attic tonight if we are to get any sleep at all."

And so Father started up the attic stairs with his lantern, his gun and his cot. Shep again took the lead, tense and wary yet purposeful, in the manner of a hunting dog on the scent of game. The attic door was closed. Father slowly pushed at it with the muzzle of his gun, Shep helping with his quivering snout to widen the opening as the door slowly opened.

Shep was the first into the room, with Father closely following, lantern held high. The light from the flickering flame danced shadows in the empty and desolate room. There was nothing there — nothing but decades of dust undisturbed except by the spoor and tracks of small animals.

Father placed the cot in the middle of the floor, laid the shotgun within reach, and put his left hand on the back of the tense and watchful dog. For a while he left the lantern burning, but nothing happened. Then he slowly extinguished the flame, feeling Shep's hackles rise and the vibrations of a low growl in Shep's throat. There was a long moment of darkness and silence, and then the bowling began, loud and clear near my father's head. Shep leaped up in a tirade of barking. Father listened, and chuckled. Then he knew the mystery of the ghost of General Jenkins.

Father lit the lantern and walked to the gable end of the room where the massive brick chimney was exposed. He could see very clearly that the great column was leaning away from the house. Over the years its great weight had caused an uneven settling until the flue was leaning or canted outward. Long unused, it was an ideal storage place for squirrels. In the early fall, the squirrels would drop their acorns and nuts in the chimney opening on the roof. Because of the slanting wall of the flue, the nuts would roll down the side of the chimney rather than fall, and the boxed space amplified the sound to a perfect imitation of a bowling ball rolling on an alley. When they bounced among the store of nuts at the bottom the rattling sound was much the same as the scattering of ten-pins. The next morning Shep routed the squirrels; a screen was placed on the chimney; and General Jenkins' spectre was no more.

There is an amusing sequel to this story. Many years later Miss Margaret Jenkins returned to Homestead and lived there in poverty. She finally lost the house by mortgage foreclosure and died soon thereafter. General Jenkins had been buried in the Jenkins family cemetery near-by. When the property passed into strange hands the Daughters of the Confederacy thought it appropriate that his body be transferred to the section of Spring Hill Cemetery in Huntington set aside for their dead.

Accordingly a number of local farmers were recruited to perform the exhumation. The old story was still remembered, so quite a crowd was on hand, some of whom were not a little apprehensive.

The coffin was located, but the men soon found that it was so heavy it couldn't be lifted by straps and muscle power. It was made of cast iron. Block-and-tackle and a mule were sent for. With a boy astride the mule and the tackle affixed to the coffin, the signal was given, the mule strained, and the cast iron box started to rise.

But as it slowly rose a distinct noise was heard from within — a liquid murmuring, a strangling gurgle. The men shouted, the crowd scattered, the boy tumbled from the mule, and down went the coffin.

Many of the astonished spectators half expected General Jenkins to rise from his grave, complete with cavalry sabre, "Jeb Stuart" plume in his hat, and blood gushing from his fatal wounds. The braver and more cynical persisted, however, and the coffin was raised again. It was apparent that the seal of the lid had leaked and that the box was full of gurgling water. In order to make the coffin more manageable, a hole was drilled and a clear amber liquid, about the color of good bourbon, flowed freely to the ground. This was probably all that remained of General Albert Gallatin Jenkins.

One further note: There is no truth whatever in the story of Jenkins' "murder" and the "lost" Jenkins' treasure. The battle of Scary was fought in July, 1861, not October, 1862. General Jenkins lived after that fight to lead his Border Rangers in several notable raids, finally joining the Army of Virginia in time for Gettysburg. He was wounded there, and was wounded again at the battle of Cloyd's Mountain. He died of his wounds in May, 1864. He was not shot on his doorstep.

As for the lost treasure, Miss Jenkins told my grandfather that the family never had any valuable silver, jewelry or coin. The adventure of my father is somewhat embellished for the sake of the narrative but is essentially true. In any event, it makes a good tale.

Homestead has been restored and is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. James T. Knight.